

Using Style Tiles to Encourage Creative Design

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

With concern about economic revitalization and need for applicable diverse abilities (Tepper & Kuh, 2011), researchers have identified creativity as an important business skill (Jay, 2000; Wagner, 2008) highly sought after by 21st century employers (Florida, 2002). The ability to think creatively has been recognized as competency agricultural communications students should possess. In Clem's (2013) Delphi study, industry professionals ranked graduates' ability to "apply creativity" as the 19th most important competency (out of 77 items that met at least 80% agreement).

According to Miller and Dumford (2014), more attention must be given to creativity in the classroom to cultivate a more creative labor force. The role of the educator in this learning atmosphere is to be an enabler of holistic, engaged learning (Doerfert, 2011). As Clem noted, "College is another opportunity to bring creativity back into the classroom to inspire problem solving within students" (Clem, 2013, p. 126). However, faculty members in agricultural communications estimated that less than half (46.7%) of classes in the discipline teach the competency related to creativity (Clem, 2013).

Because creativity is an important competency for agricultural communications students to possess, educators should help students gain creative thinking skills. To encourage students to develop and apply their creative thinking skills in a web design course at [University], the instructor introduced an innovative assignment called Style Tiles.

How it Works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

In the Web design course at [University], students learn the basics of website development while creating a professional online portfolio to display their design, writing, photography, and professional qualifications. The classroom atmosphere utilizes design-thinking strategies similar to the ideas developed by IDEO (2011), including brainstorming techniques that stimulate creativity in the design projects while remaining open to unexpected ideas and new possibilities.

At the beginning stages of designing the website, students explore others' websites to generate a list of elements to incorporate into their own website. Included in the brainstorming phase is the development of two visual prototypes called Style Tiles (Warren, n.d.), which guide the visual identity of the online portfolio site. Each Style Tile must include a logo or header, color palette, graphics, fonts, link appearance, and adjectives to describe the theme for the site.

After submission, the student receives feedback from the instructor to make revisions and be one step closer to a mockup of the website design. The use of multiple Style Tiles allows the student to visualize multiple options and even combine Style Tiles to improve individual elements without altering the design objectives (Warren, n.d.). After designing the two style tiles, students were asked to briefly reflect on this activity in a one page, double-spaced response. The instructor developed a rubric to grade the submitted Style Tiles, valued at ten percent of the total class grade. The individual elements within the assignment were weighted at 40 percent for each Style Tile and 20 percent for the reflection paper.

Results to Date/Implications

Thirty-one students completed this innovative assignment in the Fall 2015 semester. Although the assignment was intended to help them think through their website's visual identity, students reported learning a number of additional concepts, specifically Photoshop skills, time management, and creativity. One student said: "Developing the style tiles taught me how to do many things I thought I could only do in Illustrator. I now have confidence as an ag comm student to dive deeper into the design capabilities of all the Adobe programs, rather than shying away from ones with which I am less familiar."

Feedback from the students identified the ability to see the website's visual identity and compare tile designs with minimal restrictions as the best part of the experience. They said the lack of guidelines permitted them to be more creative with the assignment. One student stated: "I liked how we had a lot of creative liberty and we felt like it was our own design with little restrictions on what we could or couldn't include." Many students stated that getting a visual representation of their design ideas was beneficial. This enabled them to identify themes and generate a clearer picture of the direction they will take in their next assignment, a website mockup.

Students said the Photoshop template provided from the Style Tile website (www.styletil.es) was complicated. Although an overview of this template was provided during a class session, more time should be dedicated to explaining the template organization and how to make adjustments. Some students suggested not providing a template and letting them create their own design in any Adobe software. However, this would limit their exposure to some of the advanced features contained within the Photoshop template.

This assignment required two Style Tiles in order to challenge students' creative thinking. A few students said this was difficult because they were so attached to a single idea. One student stated: "Scavenging for another idea when I was very committed to the first was a challenge." However, many more students said creating two Style Tiles allowed them more practice and integration of key elements, while also providing an opportunity to compare a visual of two separate ideas.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

This assignment will continue to be used in future semesters of this course to help students brainstorm creative elements for their websites. The Style Tiles can also be used in other design courses in the curriculum. More class time should be dedicated to demonstrating how to use the Photoshop template so students can focus more on what they want the Style Tiles to look like and not just how to use the file. Providing students with few guidelines encouraged their creativity, but some expectations (in the form of a rubric) are still necessary to provide an assessment of their work.

Costs/Resources Needed

No costs were incurred to implement this project. The template was downloaded at no cost from www.styletil.es. Access to Adobe Photoshop is required to use the provided template file, but this program is required for students in this class. The instructor invested her time learning how to use the template and provided an additional example as a resource for students in the course.

References

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